

Interview: Directors Joe Swanberg, Adam Wingard, Simon Barrett Discuss ‘V/H/S’

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CHICAGO – Some of the finest names in modern independent cinema may be garnering their largest audiences to date when the anthology horror film, “V/H/S,” is released on October 5th. It combines five horror shorts with a “wraparound” tale in which an assortment of troublemaking vandals (including “Open Five” director Kentucker Audley) search a spooky house for a priceless VHS tape.

This segment, “Tape 56,” was directed by Adam Wingard and written by Simon Barrett, two accomplished filmmakers in their own right, who have collaborated on horror films such as “A Horrible Way to Die” and “You’re Next.” Barrett also wrote and co-produced the “V/H/S” segment entitled “The Sick Thing That Happened to Emily When She Was Younger,” which was directed by Chicago’s own Joe Swanberg (Wingard served as photographer and sound designer). Swanberg’s film stars Helen Rogers as Emily, a young woman who attempts to show her boyfriend, James (Daniel Kaufman), the apparitions haunting her apartment via web chat. Swanberg also stars opposite Sophia Takal and Kate Lyn Sheil in Ti West’s segment, “Second Honeymoon,” about a couple who are stalked by a mysterious intruder. Each segment provides an intriguing take on the found footage genre, while experimenting with new techniques and visual approaches.

In this exclusive two-part interview, Hollywood Chicago spoke with Swanberg, Wingard and Barrett about their views on found footage horror films, their evolution as artists and their exciting future projects.

PART I: ADAM WINGARD AND SIMON BARRETT



Adam Wingard, director of 'Tape 56' in V/H/S, a Magnet Release.

Photo credit: Magnet Releasing

HollywoodChicago.com: Adam, I just finished watching your first feature, "Home Sick," which I really enjoyed. How did you and Simon first meet and start to collaborate?

Adam Wingard: Well, I appreciate you pretending to like "Home Sick." [laughs] We initially met while I was filming "Home Sick" in Alabama and Simon was filming "Dead Birds" in Mobile. My producer and friend at the time, E.L. Katz, was writing for Fangoria, and his assignment was to do on-set coverage of "Dead Birds." I went down there with him, and we ended up interviewing Simon. Over the course of our interview, I started talking with Simon about John Woo movies like "The Killer," and we realized that we had an extremely mutual appreciation for Hong Kong cinema. As we kept in touch over the years, I realized that I had never had much of a career and Simon's career was at an all-time low. So we reached a point where it was perfect for us to get together and make a film. [laughs] Our movie, "A Horrible Way to Die," is where everything started, and we've been going at it ever since.

Simon Barrett: I was basically trying to get Hollywood studio jobs and get my scripts financed. I was really miserable because I was going up for projects that I hated and I was only considering them because I needed money. Fortunately, I didn't get hired for any of those jobs so I don't have the shame of them on my résumé. I was unhappy at the time, but in retrospect, I got lucky. Adam was making movies that I really loved. I actually agree with you that "Home Sick" is an excellent movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: "Home Sick" struck me as more of a darkly comic film, whereas "Horrible Way to Die" has greater emotional stakes.

Wingard: Yeah, that's true. "Home Sick" was a rescue effort from the start because we were all kids. I was like 19 going on 20 and fresh out of film school when we first started the movie, so our sensibilities weren't quite as refined. We initially went into it thinking, "Let's make a scary, serious horror film," but factors kept us from doing it. Our crew couldn't get more than ten or twelve shots a day because they were so slow. We decided that the only way to save this thing would be to embrace the madness and give it the feel of a funny, distasteful Italian film from the '70s, like a Fulci movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: What aspects of found footage films did you want to avoid while tackling the sub-genre?

Wingard: The main thing that always irked me about found footage films was their faux authenticity. I've loved movies like "Cloverfield," but I've still been bothered by the fact that I never felt like I was seeing prosumer cameras doing prosumer things. I enjoyed the film "Chronicle" quite a bit, but I liked the first half of it much more because it used a more degraded XL2 camera and it had an interesting look to it. Halfway through the film, the characters switched to using a really nice camera. Suddenly, I was taken out of the found footage world because the film now looked like a real movie. With "V/H/S," I wanted to figure out how we could pull the "Trash Humpers" style into the horror world and really give the feel of something real happening. The way to do that was to combine analog stuff and really embrace the glitchiness of that kind of technology.

The camera that we ended up using was an old VHS camera, and it was one that Simon had used since he was a kid. I told Simon that I wanted to shoot half of it on an actual VHS camera. He brought it in to show me, and it turned out that it was the exact same camera that I had while growing up as a kid in middle school and high school doing martial arts films. The camera has a huge battery on the back, and if you're running around with the camera, the battery will jiggle and your footage turns into a scrambled glitchy mess for a couple seconds before going back to normal. Back in the day, I would be like, "The shot's ruined, we'll have to do redo it." But for this movie, we were actively seeking out those problematic things because it's become a retro style. New cameras don't have those same problems, so now they come off as foreign. To kids who weren't even born when VHS cameras were being used, this film probably looks completely insane and very interesting.

Barrett: I think in a weird way, with your question, you've summed up what the real creative mission was with "V/H/S." Adam and I were well-suited to be the people to film the wraparound scenes because it established the visual style of the film. That's the way we creatively approach stuff: "We like this in theory but all of these previous movies have sucked. How do we do something new with this?" I love the idea of found footage horror movies in theory. There's so many reasons why it's cool and you can do so many amazing new things with familiar genre archetypes in that style. But lately, a lot of them have been inauthentic cash-ins. Every filmmaker in the project was asking themselves, "How do we make something new in this genre? What have I not seen done before? What's a style that I haven't seen before, what's a concept that I haven't seen before, what's a reason why someone would film themselves encountering something scary?"

When he first came up with the idea of found footage shorts, [producer] Brad Miska cracked a code in a way. You can tell a story in 20 minutes and not run into the problem of asking, "Why are they still filming this?" You don't have time for that "Cloverfield"-type conversational stuff when your segment is only 20 minutes long. We were all able to do new cool things, and that was fun. Even for the wraparound, we wanted to capture the feeling of a VHS tape that you randomly bought at a garage sale for five cents and put it in your VCR.



Calvin Reeder stars in Adam Wingard's 'Tape 56' in V/H/S, a Magnet Release.

Photo credit: Magnet Releasing

HollywoodChicago.com: Was the wraparound planned and shot after the shorts had been made?

Barrett: That would've been smart. [laughs] Actually, Adam and I filmed the wraparound before anything else was shot. You can even see in the film itself that we designed the wraparound for three or four shorts. Ultimately, when we had five filmmakers create shorts, that's when we decided to come back to our characters for the end credit montage. Adam was the first person to say that Radio Silence's short had such a strong ending that we shouldn't come back to the wraparound.

Wingard: We had to chop up the wraparound so much that we decided that it would be better to end with a montage instead. We were able to realize that the Radio Silence short ended on a strong moment and we just needed to let it speak for itself and wrap the whole production up. It wasn't important for us to have the last word.

HollywoodChicago.com: And yet it all sort of gels. Kentucker Audley's reaction to Ti West's segment is perfectly timed in the wraparound.

Barrett: At which time, you may realize that the things in the room that Kentucker is in have changed. Sometimes the advantage of working on a microbudget project like "A Horrible Way to Die" or "V/H/S" is that it teaches you how to work spontaneously. There wasn't a lot of planning on "V/H/S," and a lot of the planning that did happen didn't work. But Adam and I are used to adapting in the moment.

Wingard: We ended up responding to the links between the shorts, the tone of the shorts and the overall pace of them. That dictated where we felt they should go throughout the film. We knew that we wanted to bookend the film with the two most action-packed shorts. For the others, it was more about watching them altogether and feeling out pacing-wise what made the most sense.

HollywoodChicago.com: You both have some exciting projects coming up, including the horror film, "You're Next," and the action/thriller "Dead Spy Running."

Barrett: "You're Next" will be released by Lionsgate on August 23rd, 2013. For "Dead Spy Running," we're not allowed to say very much at this point, other than that it's a really cool project and we're both really excited to be involved in it.

Wingard: We're excited that Warner Bros. is taking us seriously as filmmakers and that they're not just throwing us more found footage or home invasion stuff. They respect the fact that we're interested in doing other genres including action, so we'll have our chance to do a fun action movie.

Barrett: Hopefully fans who are looking at the "Dead Spy Running" announcement and are completely befuddled can look at Adam and my body of work and see that we've never done anything for the money. It's a really cool project that creatively intrigued both of us. There's a really great team of producers and executives at Warner Bros., and we just realized after meeting with them a couple times that we had the potential to a.) do something new in a different genre that intrigued us, and b.) make a really great, fun film. So we're excited to get the ball rolling on that. It's going to be really awesome, we promise. [laughs]

PART II: JOE SWANBERG



Joe Swanberg, director of 'The Sick Thing That Happened to Emily When She Was Younger' in V/H/S, a Magnet Release.

Photo credit: Magnet Releasing

HollywoodChicago.com: Your film, "Silver Bullets," took place during the production of a werewolf picture. Did that experience make you want to probe further into the horror genre?

Joe Swanberg: Yeah, definitely. "Silver Bullets" was the first time that I even thought about how my style could translate into the horror [genre]. I was also influenced by my work with Ti West and Larry Fessenden. In "Silver Bullets," we're watching Ti's character put together his werewolf movie. During my research for the film, I asked Ti a lot of questions and went through the filmmaking process with him. When it came time to do "V/H/S," I felt a lot more comfortable with how horror films worked and what needed to be done onset. In the meantime, between "Silver Bullets" and "V/H/S," I had acted in "A Horrible Way to Die" and "You're Next," in which I got to experience the genre through Simon Barrett and Adam Wingard's world. All of those experiences made me really excited about trying to do my own horror thing.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've told me in past interviews that you don't consider yourself as much of an actor, but in the last few years, you've been tackling a wide range of roles.

Swanberg: I would actually say that this year is the first year that I would start to consider myself an actor at all. I was mostly just acting in my own stuff or playing small parts in my friends' movies, but ever since Adam started casting me in his films, I've been working a lot more as an actor. Some of the best learning experiences that I've had as a director have come from acting in other people's movies. It's just such a unique experience to be on someone else's set, and have such an inside view of how somebody else is making their movie. It's really easy for me to take those lessons back to the work that I do. I feel really thankful that I have something approaching an acting career these days because it's really making me a much better director and a much more sensitive director of actors.

I had a real epiphany on the set of "You're Next" while watching Adam direct that movie, because it just made me realize how little I know about how to direct horror and action. As a director, if I want to be really good at this, I shouldn't just know how to direct comedies and

relationship dramas. I should also know how to direct a musical or a horror movie or an action movie or any of these other kinds of genres. All of it builds a useful skill set. Being able to do “V/H/S” and approach it like a true genre project was just a great experience for me.

HollywoodChicago.com: When I interviewed Sophia Takal, she told me that the filming of Ti’s short, “Second Honeymoon,” felt really casual and loose.

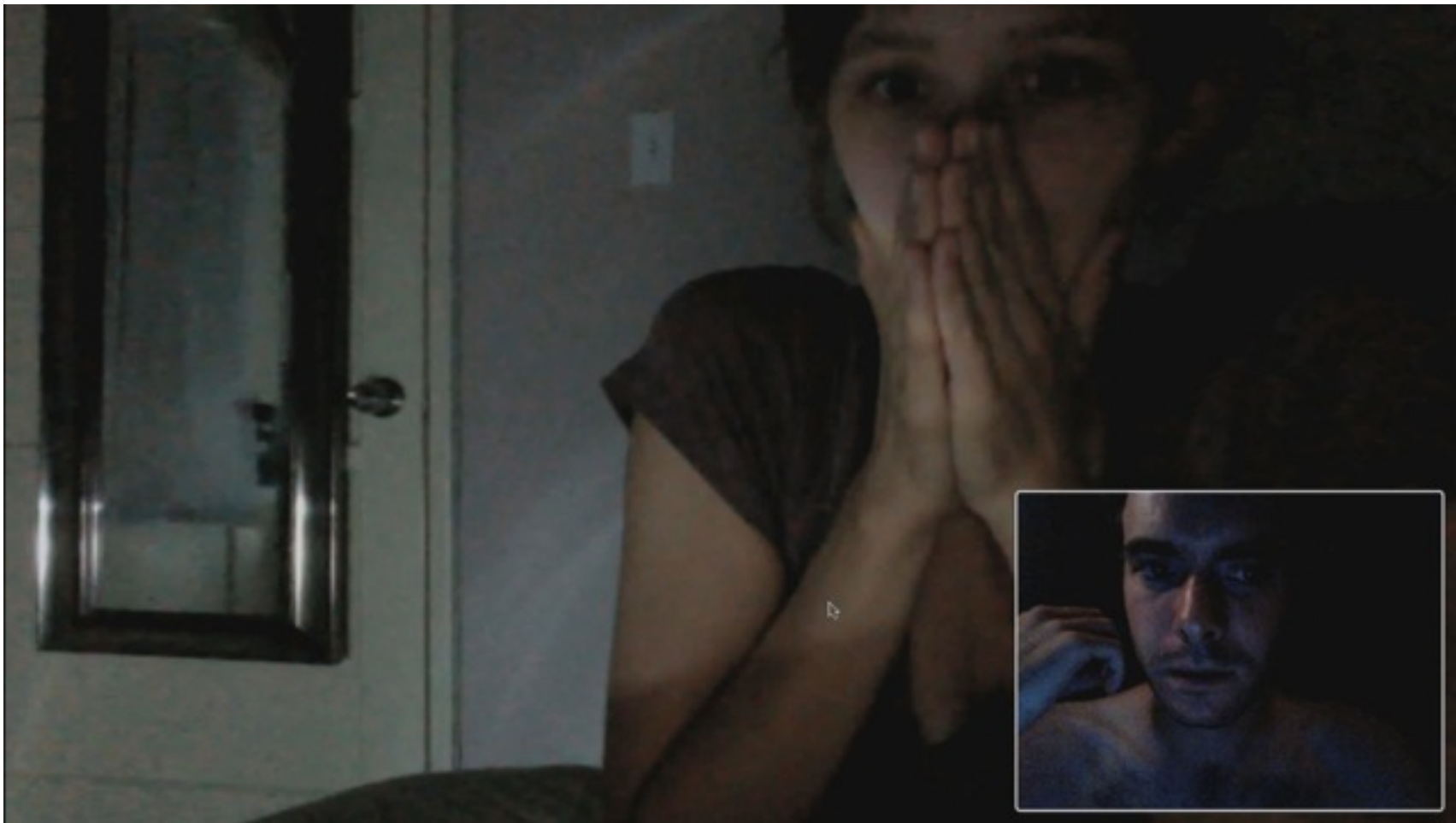
Swanberg: That was a specific choice that Ti made. I’ve known him for seven or eight years now, and he’s not a loose director. Doing the “V/H/S” segment, I knew that the looseness onset was a specific thing that Ti was aiming for, and it was really smart of him. If you’re attempting to make a film resembling the handheld video that a couple shoots on their road trip, approaching it with a strict, structured feel isn’t going to result in the sort of naturalism that Ti wanted. It was really cool. I felt like Sophia and I had a lot of freedom on that segment to play around with those characters and do it in a way that allows the audience to feel like a fly on the wall.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your segment grapples with major themes from your previous films, such as the role of technology in modern relationships, while still working as a found footage horror film. What inspired you to tell the story through web chat sessions?

Swanberg: It’s something that I’ve been interested in for a while. The idea of doing an entire feature over Skype or over any kind of video chat is pretty daunting. There’s a film that Kate Lyn Sheil acted in [called “SkyDiver”] that’s done entirely through video chat. For me, that structure is a little tough to take in such a huge dose. What was nice about “V/H/S” was I only had to think about doing it for 15 minutes. One of the things that I really love about it is that it allows you to look at both characters’ faces the entire time, which is not something that you typically get to do in a film. It gave me a chance to do something almost approaching split screen. [Spoiler Alert!] Because one character is deceiving another character, it’s nice to have that deception displayed full-frontally onscreen. There’s not a hero and a villain lurking in the shadows. There’s a hero and a villain who are both right there the whole time. Psychologically, it makes the betrayal that much worse because you’ve come to know both of them.

HollywoodChicago.com: Initially the segment plays like a parody of “Paranormal Activity,” with the haunted woman comforted by her maddeningly oblivious boyfriend. Was any of that intentional?

Swanberg: I actually didn’t see it until after I did the segment. For me, it’s definitely funny at times, and a lot of the credit goes to Simon Barrett for writing such an interesting character. I feel that Emily is so fascinating. You’re used to seeing that sort of female character in horror films, and you’re used to seeing her in a scary situation where she panics and does something stupid. What’s really cool about Emily is that she’s actually really curious and adventurous and brave. She’s the opposite of the typical woman in a horror movie. There’s a natural humor involved because she seems so unafraid of a situation that’s really terrifying. [laughs]



Helen Rogers and Daniel Kaufman star in Joe Swanberg’s ‘The Sick Thing That Happened to Emily When She Was Younger’ in V/H/S, a Magnet Release.

Photo credit: Magnet Releasing

HollywoodChicago.com: Helen Rogers delivers a breakout performance as Emily, and inspires more empathy than all of the other “V/H/S” characters combined. Where did you find her?

Swanberg: It’s kind of funny because the first time I met her and talked to her about the movie was over Skype. I had seen her in a short film called “Block,” and thought she was really great in that. I saw that film a few weeks before I got the script from Simon and she was on my mind at the time. It felt like a really good fit for that character. I’ve worked with her a couple times since then, and she’s a really great young actor. I feel like the work she’s doing in “V/H/S” is clearly great. She’s an exciting person to watch.

HollywoodChicago.com: What sort of technical challenges did this film present?

Swanberg: We built a schedule that allowed us a lot of rehearsal time. It was almost like choreographing a music video in which there were

long extended takes. Not only was Helen performing, but she also had to be the camera operator by default. We were also dealing with little kid actors [laughs] and it was tricky to get them to hit their marks and not look at the camera and not smile and not do things that are just natural for them to do. We built an extra couple of days into the shoot schedule to make sure that we had plenty of time.

I really wanted practical effects rather than digital effects, so we worked with Lino Stavole, who I think is a genius. [Spoiler Alert!] He had to build all of those effects, such as when Emily is digging into her arm or when James cuts her back open and reaches in. All of that stuff had to be designed and built in a way in which the actors could interact with it. Since all of my previous work was based in naturalism and set in a real world environment where I was basically just shooting at real people's apartments, it was a great experience to suddenly be doing a project that was not only scripted, but also involved all of these moving pieces and new challenges that I hadn't faced before. It was really fun for me.

HollywoodChicago.com: Could you see yourself making a feature utilizing similar methods?

Swanberg: Yeah, definitely. I've always liked horror movies and I've always felt like they're the best genre that we have to make social and political commentaries. It's definitely something that I've been thinking about. I just did a movie called "Drinking Buddies" this summer, which was also a new challenge for me and a much bigger production than I've done before, and that was really fun too. I'm kind of torn because I want to keep doing these bigger comedy/drama type movies, but I also want to go back and do another horror film. So maybe I'll have to figure out how to do both.

The experience of doing "V/H/S" and of working with Adam and Simon on some bigger projects really prepared me to do "Drinking Buddies" and meet that challenge. The timing worked out really well. I'm in post-production on "Drinking Buddies" now, and am hoping to finish it up and start showing it around next year. It's definitely different from "V/H/S." [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: There's also been some buzz building around your performance in Wingard's "You're Next," which will be released next August.

Swanberg: I'm really excited about that movie. It was an amazing experience and it has a huge cast of great actors in it. I can't wait for people to see it. It's taken a long road toward getting there, but it was great that Lionsgate finally announced a release date. When it comes out next summer, I think that it's going to really surprise people in a good way.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your film "The Zone," which completes the "Full Moon Trilogy" that also includes "Silver Bullets" and "Art History," ends on a note of finality, hinting that it may be the last of your intimate micro-budget dramas for the time being.

Swanberg: I definitely felt like something was coming to a close. The self-investigation that I underwent in those films was coming to a close and I had reached a point as a filmmaker where I was interested in exploring different kinds of things and telling stories on a larger canvas. For the year that I made "Silver Bullets," "Art History" and "The Zone," it was cool to be able to dig really deep into one kind of thing. But the last two years have been really fun in allowing me to move away from that and do projects like "V/H/S" and "Drinking Buddies." I'm certain that I will go back to these smaller, self-investigation films at some point, but I have to honestly say that I'm enjoying not taking a hard critical look at the filmmaking process right now. I'm just having fun telling stories.

HollywoodChicago.com: You told me that you felt some pressure while making "Alexander the Last," because it was your first film with relatively big names and it inspired you to subsequently make a series of smaller films. Did you feel that you had to go back and explore your technique in films like "Silver Bullets" before you could make "V/H/S"?

Swanberg: Yeah, I felt like I had to make sure that I knew who I was and why I was making the films that I had made so that I wasn't just flailing about and doing all these different kinds of projects. I wanted to do a movie like "V/H/S" for a reason. It helps that Simon Barrett and I are friends and that he wrote that script knowing that I was going to direct it. I was able to work the things that interest me into a genre project, and it's the same with "Drinking Buddies." Because of its size and the people involved [including Anna Kendrick and Ron Livingston], it's atypical of the type of films that I've made, but in other ways, it's exactly like my other movies: it's improvised and I built it in the same sort of organic way. The way that you felt about my "V/H/S" segment is the way that I feel about "Drinking Buddies." It feels like one of my movies even though it's really different. I can't escape myself. [laughs] Even when I'm exploring these other territories, my natural aesthetic and interests are always going to come through no matter how big the budget is or what the subject matter is.

HollywoodChicago.com: It's great to have that personal stamp on your work that allows audiences to say, "That's a Swanberg movie!"

Swanberg: Yeah, it's nice because I don't even have to try. [laughs]

'V/H/S' stars Hannah Fierman, Joe Swanberg, Sophia Takal, Kate Lyn Sheil, Helen Rogers and Kentucker Audley. It was written by Simon Barrett, David Bruckner, Glenn McQuaid, Radio Silence, Nicholas Tecosky and Ti West and directed by David Bruckner, Ti West, Glenn McQuaid, Joe Swanberg, Radio Silence and Adam Wingard. It will be released October 5th at Landmark Century Centre. It is rated R.



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